DISCUSSIONS.

MILTON AND SYLLABISM.

The papers on 'Milton's Heroic Line considered from an Historical Standpoint,' by Professor Walter Thomas, which appeared in the numbers of this *Review* for July and October 1907, seem to me models of exact study. In that respect, at least, they may be ranked with the work of Mr Robert Bridges; higher praise no one could desire. The conclusions reached by their writer, however, are so remarkable that some further examination of his argument seems called for before we can accept the thesis he so ably defends.

And, first, I must call attention to a point about which he is, I think, unintentionally misleading. He quotes (Vol. II, p. 303, near foot) Milton's preface to *Paradise Lost*, and makes the poet affirm that one principal element of his verse is a 'fit quantity of syllables,' assuming that by this is meant a fixed number of syllables. The assumption is made in the next sentence but one, and is several times repeated. Surely this assumption is unfounded. Milton wrote not 'a fit quantity' but 'fit quantity,' and I have always understood the words to mean *suitable sound* of syllables, 'quantity' being used in its familiar technical sense. The indefinite article added by Prof. Thomas, and quite properly shown by him to form no part of the original sentence—for it is outside the quotation-mark[1]—conveys an erroneous, or at least doubtful, meaning. It would be as reasonable to imagine that 'apt numbers' refers to an invariable number of syllables in a line, as to suppose that 'fit quantity' does so.

Prof. Thomas must not, therefore, assume that he has Milton's authority for saying that each heroic line contains ten syllables, neither more nor less; but he is of course well within his rights in seeking to prove that this is so. He makes the attempt with great ingenuity and wide range of example. He does not, indeed, go all lengths with Messrs van Dam and Stoffel, or with those pupils of Prof. Bright of Baltimore, a tractate by one of whom is reviewed in another part of the number which contains his second article (Vol. III, p. 80). He admits variation of accent, though not of syllabic number. Even as regards the

[1] On p. 309, l. 2, however, it is included within the quotation-marks.

latter, he recognises (*ibid.*, p. 19, l. 9) a few rare exceptions such as (*P. L.*, VIII, 649):

Thy condescension, and shall be honoured ever.

These he considers to be of the nature of exceptions which prove the rule, and by unsparing use of contractions, aphaeresis, etc., he tries to establish as a fixed law of scansion that 'Milton never allows his line to fall short of or to exceed ten counted syllables' (*ibid.*, p. 29, l. 17).

I believe such a view to be nearer the truth than that of those who find in Milton's verse only wild licence. He was evidently guided by very strict principles of metre. Beyond doubt, he sought to draw tighter bonds which had been unduly relaxed. Dramatic blank verse, even by Shakespeare himself and far more by his followers, had been written with a freedom that threatened to annihilate the distinction between prose and metre. Such verse would have ill suited Milton's majestic strain. He achieved his statelier measure by rejecting dramatic laxity, discarding for example almost entirely the distinctly hypermetrical syllable after a caesura. But to argue from this that he returned to a 'drumming decasyllabon,' and that every syllable which exceeds typical number is to be excluded from scansion, seems to me pushing conjecture too far.

Appeal is made to Milton's own spelling. That, fortunately, we can test for ourselves by reference to Canon Beeching's facsimile reprint (Clarendon Press, 1900), but we must consider it as a whole. Prof. Thomas quotes from *Comus* such examples as *count'nance* (l. 68), *th' Indian* (l. 139), *t' whom* (l. 217). But he does not quote such others as *eev'n* (l. 202), *unprincipl'd* (l. 367), *self-consum'd* (l. 597), where the apostrophe cannot mean entire omission. It was shown long ago by Mr Bridges that the substitution of an apostrophe for a vowel, in Milton's very elaborate and carefully carried out system of spelling, does not necessarily imply that the vowel is not to be sounded; this short cut to certainty is therefore closed against us.

Besides, if Milton's own spelling is to be our guide, a contrary verdict must be given. *Comus* furnishes many such examples as *feaverish* (l. 8), *groveling* (l. 53) [Prof. Thomas quotes this as *grovling* (p. 306, l. 17), so must fight out the textual question with Canon Beeching], *likeliest* (l. 90), *different* (l. 145), *frivolous* (l. 445), *innocent* (l. 574). If we are to go by spelling, these must be trisyllabic sounds. Words like *äereal*, *ambrosial*, *fiery*, *glorious*, etc., are of course disputable, and *mansion* (l. 2) would be reckoned a dissyllable by most critics. It is certainly conceivable that *different* may have been sounded as two syllables, but to believe that *innocent* was so treated requires robust faith; Milton's spelling at any rate presents both as words of three syllables.

These instances are taken from *Comus* merely because that poem was under notice; *Paradise Lost* and its sequel yield a like result. In them, too, we have the same elaborate system of spelling, and though Milton must for these poems have trusted others to carry out his

instructions, the instructions were evidently again his own. *P. L.*, Bk. I, shows the same peculiar rendering of words like *manacl'd* (l. 426), *dark'n'd* (l. 599), *doubl'd* (616), *rift'd* (687). If in its first two paragraphs we find *Heav'n* and *heav'nly, th' Aonian* and *th' upright*, we also find *glory above, ethereal sky, prison ordain'd. Adventrous* (l. 13) is balanced by *tempestuous* (l. 77). *Ruin* takes the place of a monosyllable in l. 91. Other words spelt without contraction in the course of the next few pages are *ignominy and shame* (l. 115), *glory extinct* (l. 141), *conquerour* (l. 143), *sulphurous* (l. 171), *groveling* (l. 280), *to adore* (l. 323). Such spellings are much too numerous to be deemed printers' mistakes.

Typography, then, is inconclusive of the question. Nor do the historical arguments advanced by Prof. Thomas seem more decisive. He urges that our heroic line began as a strict decasyllable, on French models. Granted; but the question is how long our poets remained content with this form. He quotes definitions by early metrists; but our prosodians have always tended to lay down rules more strict than the practice of our great singers warranted. He argues that contraction of words was commoner then than now, and no one doubts that forms like *'gan* for *began* or *'sdain'd* for *disdained* represent actual omissions of sound; but does this justify our making monosyllables of *garden, river, savour, being*, and a host of similar instances? He cites (see Vol. III, p. 17 for this and some of the foregoing) Jaques in *As you like it* and Pope in the *Essay on Criticism* as identifying ten syllables with heroic metre; but such phrases might be used to-day without carrying the significance ascribed to them. When we read 'My brethren, these things ought not so to be,' we call it a line of blank verse, not because we think such a line must contain ten syllables and no more—for modern verse has taught us otherwise—but because this is the normal type, the most easily recognisable form. Finally, he suggests (*ibid.*, p. 29) that 'both the anapaestic and the dactylic rhythm was [were] practically unknown to English epic and dramatic poetry' at this date, being 'almost exclusively confined to popular songs and ballads,' so it is unlikely that Milton would adopt it in 'the loftiest form of verse.' It will be well to consider what is involved in this suggestion.

There is an obvious difference between the 'triplet' of heroic metre and the 'triple-time foot' of our so-called dactylic or anapaestic verse. In the latter, three syllables are given their ordinary full pronunciation; in the former, they occupy the time normally given to two syllables. Milton did not, I think, ever intend to vary the time of his feet. His rejection, already mentioned, of the hypermetrical syllable following a caesura seems clear proof of this. In *Comus* we find many lines like:

> And, as I past, I worshipt; if those you seek... (l. 302).
> Alone, and helpless. Is this the confidence... (l. 583).
> Root-bound, that fled Apollo. Fool, do not boast... (l. 662).

Such lines are exceedingly rare in the *Paradises*, so rare that I wonder Prof. Thomas does not ask us to say *cond'scension* in the line previously quoted, no more difficult a contraction than some which he recommends.

But while such lines are rare, lines which can be read with the *rippling* effect of true triplets are exceedingly numerous. A typical instance is (*P. L.*, I, 520):

Fled over Adria to th' Hesperian Fields.

Even supposing that *th'* implies real elision, and that *Hesperian* can be reduced to three syllables as *Hess-pere-yan*, there remains *Adria*, which cannot by any method known to me be made an absolute dissyllable. But if once we admit a trisyllabic effect, however slight—the tiniest ripple, or *slur* if you like—in even one word, a door is opened through which many others may pass.

The word *slur*, properly understood, explains much. And here historical considerations rightly come in. We know that Milton studied Italian verse. From it he probably took his initial 'double trochee,' though Spenser had already used it, as in that line beloved of Leigh Hunt (*F. Q.*, I, 3, 7):

As the god of my life. Why hath he me abhorr'd?

What more likely, or rather more certain, than that Milton had noted the effect produced by two Italian vowels melting into each other, and sought to copy it? Prof. Thomas of course knows this, and duly refers to it (Vol. II, p. 295; Vol. III, pp. 20–1). So that the issue really is—Do such meltings leave us with two vowels, or with one only?

Here it must be remembered that the question is not what happens in Italian speech—a point on which it would be rash for foreigners to dogmatise—but what takes place in our own speech. We can know only what happens in modern language; whether it was the same in Milton's day can be matter only of inference. Even as to what happens now there can be doubt. I, for example, do not think there is actual fusion in our pronunciation of 'many a' (Vol. III, p. 21, last line). As a rule, I do not think there is often absolute fusion even in colloquial speech, much less in the more careful utterance with which we naturally read great poetry. Such questions, however, are undoubtedly difficult, and verse-critics are by no means always competent to deal with them. I would not accept the pronouncement of Italian grammarians without sifting, any more than the verdicts of our own. But I may remind Prof. Thomas that Dr Abbott, whom he cites as an authority on Shakespeare's contractions, cautiously says: 'In many cases it is impossible to tell whether in a trisyllabic foot an unemphatic syllable is merely slurred or wholly suppressed, as for instance the first *e* in "different"' (*Shakespearian Grammar*, 1872, § 452). Such caution is wise.

Our English speech-habit is notoriously intolerant of elision. So much so, that we are tempted to slip in a consonant between two unaccented vowels, and even educated speakers are heard to say 'the idea(r) of it.' Nor are we fond of the effect produced by a lightly accented vowel coming immediately before a more heavily accented one, an effect satirised in Pope's line:

Tho' oft the ear the open vowels tire.

Midway between these comes the 'rippling' effect produced by pronouncing both vowels lightly and rapidly; is not this what is meant by 'slurring'? It is an effect so characteristically English that one can hardly believe Milton renounced it. Whether it is not also the effect produced by Italian pronunciation of words like *Siena* and *duomo* I must leave others to say; Browning, we know, accounted the former of these words a dissyllable[1].

I do not, therefore, suppose that Milton intended any of his extra syllables to receive full weight in utterance. What Prof. Saintsbury calls 'the blessed trisyllabic swing and swell' does not cause any disturbance of verse-measure. Our grammarians err in this matter, because they count by syllables instead of time-beats. If they would be content to say that every line of Milton's heroic verse contains 'ten semi-peds,' as an old writer calls it—or whatever similar phrase they prefer—and would not insist that each 'semi-ped' must contain one syllable and no more, discussion would be simplified. What A calls one syllable B calls two, and mere logomachy follows. The real point is whether temporal structure is affected, and to say that three syllables may never be pronounced in the normal time of two is to ignore an exceedingly common form of utterance.

Prof. Thomas will, I think, have much sympathy with this argument. He opposes (p. 22, foot) any attempt to pronounce 'No advantage' as *nadvantage*, and asks that it be sounded 'No 'dvantage.' What is this but a very rapid pronunciation of the initial *a*? So with 'he (e)ffected,' and 'my (a)dventure,' later in the same paragraph. Without following him through all his numerous examples, one may ask whether the principle now suggested does not secure all he wants, preserving that 'regularity' of metre for which he rightly contends.

Historically, the case for this trisyllabic *ripple* is very strong. Side by side with the 'foreign' imported verse there was always the older English line with its loose array of syllables punctuated by accent and alliteration. Would not our poets naturally seek to engraft on the new measure somewhat of the old freedom? That they did so, even to excess, has been already pointed out. It is Milton's glory that he restricted this tendency, and showed how it was possible to unite strict measure with sufficient and admirable freedom. But strict measure does not imply syllable-counting, and any attempt to make it do so must be strenuously resisted.

For, such an attempt sacrifices effects which one feels sure Milton deliberately sought. The famous line (*P.L.*, VII, 411) describing the great sea-monsters as:

> Wallowing unwieldie, enormous in thir Gate...

(I copy the original spelling), loses its descriptive vividness if we truncate

[1] Whoever to scan this is ill able
Forgets the town's name's a dissyllable.
Pacchiarotto, § XV.

the first two words, which it will be observed Milton's own spelling does not do. That other famous couplet (*P.L.*, III, 1021–2):

> So he with difficulty and labour hard
> Mov'd on, with difficulty and labour hee...

becomes commonplace if we make four syllables of *diff-i-cult-yand*. Even such an ordinary line as (*P.L.*, I, 770):

> Poure forth thir populous youth about the Hive...

is less rhythmically expressive if we somehow reduce *populous* to a dissyllable. And I must really protest against the assertion (Vol. II, p. 307) that *highest* is a monosyllable in (*P.R.*, IV, 106):

> Aim at the highest, without the highest attain'd...

and that 'any other scansion resolves the verse into prose.' It is a singular conception of verse which makes it depend on absolute monotony of rhythm, and there is no need to introduce any such conception.

I am, however, quite willing to admit that Milton may have written by rule as well as by ear. Mr Bridges, we know, holds that he 'came to scan his verses one way and read them another,' and sought 'to keep blank verse decasyllabic by means of fictions' (*Milton's Prosody*, 1901, pp. 18 and 19). And I think it highly probable that Milton relied on concurrence of vowels to justify many of his lines. This will explain harsh-seeming phrases like *express thee unblam'd, into utter darkness, no ingrateful food, virtue in her shape*, and should be remembered in dealing with the crucial line (*P.R.*, III, 586):

> Shoots invisible vertue even to the deep...

where, by the by, one would have expected to find the spelling *ev'n*. Some such doctrine of elision seems needed in connection with the frequent slurring of *-ue* in particular. And it is easily admitted when we recall how persistent this same doctrine of elision has been in our verse and our criticism. To this day, our poets show a marked fondness for effects dependent on 'slurring' of vowels. Tennyson's line in *Lucretius*:

> Ruining along the illimitable inane...

could be reduced to ten syllables by the methods now under discussion. So could, wholly or almost wholly, that more difficult heroic line in Mr Swinburne's *Elegy* on Burton:

> Illimitable, insuperable, infinite.

And I lately saw a poet rebuked for 'eliding' a syllable ending in *-m*, though he—poor soul!—had probably no thought of 'elision,' but intended only rapid pronunciation.

Even in Dryden and Pope, and even in the comic verse of *Hudibras*, is it certain that elision was a reality? Did people really say *tatone* for *to atone*, *thinsane* for *the insane*, etc.? Mr Bridges, in three articles contributed to the *Athenaeum* during January, 1904—articles to be read by all interested in this subject—aptly asks whether we must say:

> Tell what her Dameter tan inch is...

for 'Diameter to an inch.' And it is difficult to believe that Pope said *vilet* for *violet*, made actual dissyllables of words like *avarice, amorous, following, virtuous, he impairs*, or that anybody could make a true monosyllable of *flow'r'd*. One knows that Dryden in his prefaces maintained elision, but did he mean more than that the syllables were to count as one? Cowper, who is twice quoted by Prof. Thomas (Vol. III, pp. 20 and 24, *notes*), speaks of 'cutting short' a *the*; does this imply total omission of the vowel? I am much inclined to think that total elision is a fiction of grammarians, and of poets playing the grammarian to their own detriment; and that the real use of such spellings as *t' atone* is merely to indicate that the word *to* should not receive distinct pronunciation, but should be slurred or glided into the following vowel. In this connection it may be remembered that Pope gave special praise to his own line:

The freezing Tanais through a waste of snows...

where surely a trisyllabic effect must be heard in the proper name.

Returning to Milton, I doubt if we can ever feel sure of his accentuation in cases otherwise doubtful, therefore the question about his 'final trochee'—in words like *surface, exile, future, prostrate*, etc.—remains insoluble. Modern poets, however, use this cadence. Much discussion about accent in § 7 of these papers, and tiltings with Prof. Masson and Mr Bridges (cf. also Vol. II, pp. 313–4), can lead to no result. I note that the critic is driven to admit 'some slip on the part of the poet' (Vol. III, p. 37, l. 14), which is always a dangerous argument. Milton's principles should not be conceived as cast-iron rules. He departs from them occasionally, perhaps on purpose to show his freedom. If he usually slurs such words as *to atone*, he sometimes gives the vowel its full value. If he most often so treats the termination *-ble* before a vowel, as in (*P.L.*, II, 626):

Abominable, inutterable, and worse...,

he can also write (*ibid.*, V, 565):

To human sense th' invisible exploits.

Similarly, many compound words are accented either on first or second syllable at pleasure, sometimes being repeated twice in the same line with different accentuation, as Prof. Thomas has not failed to observe. That as a rule Milton 'avoids fusing stressed syllables' (Vol. III, p. 21, l. 6) is a just remark, but this rule too has its exceptions. And when it comes to sounding 'the Most High' as 'thee Most High' (*ibid.*, p. 29, l. 2), and similarly treating 'the high Capital' (p. 37, l. 4), I think we must feel that the limits of sane prosody have been overstepped.

My own feeling is that they are overstepped also when we are asked (p. 32, l. 4) to accept such a contraction as 'th' voice' in (*P.L.*, X, 198):

Because thou hast heark'nd to the voice of thy Wife.

The difficulty, however, of feeling sure in such matters is shown in a

line almost immediately following (*ibid.*, x, 204), which I give like the last in Milton's own spelling:

Unbid, and thou shalt eat th' Herb of th' Field.

Prof. Thomas has not noticed the apparent contradiction in this second line. He suggests (p. 31, lowest line) that we 'elide' the first *the*, but says nothing about the second, to whose vowel he evidently allows full value. Yet Milton's spelling, if rightly reproduced, 'elides' both. I cannot myself read the line as printed by Canon Beeching, and can only suppose there is a mistake, probably in the original type.

The subject being so beset with difficulties, it seems to me extremely hazardous to assume that Milton favoured colloquial contractions, surely unsuited to his dignified verse. Is it not much more probable that his apostrophe represented light and rapid sound—a sort of blurred vowel? 'Rapidly sounded, but not counted in the line,' is one phrase used in these papers (p. 30, l. 10); does not this practically mean, 'not counted in the beats'? History and theory both support this; Elizabethan freedom, reproduced during the last century, shows it possible in fact as undoubtedly in prosody. With modern poetry Prof. Thomas is perhaps less intimately acquainted than with older, for I find him asserting (p. 25, l. 5) that at present English poets use only feet of two or of three syllables, whereas they certainly also use one of four, commonly containing a primary and a secondary accent. Here, as always, the burden of proof rests on those who depart from customary views, and I suspect it is here too heavy for the bearer. I am not convinced that Milton pronounced *spiritual* as two syllables, though I am quite sure that he gave it the value of only two syllables in his line (*P.L.*, IV, 677):

Millions of spiritual Creatures walk the Earth.

Nor am I convinced that he so pronounced *innocent, populous, capital, politic, piety, deity*, and many such words, though beyond doubt they occupy the time usually assigned to two syllables in his verse. One line, thus printed in Canon Beeching's edition (*P.R.*, III, 256):

Th' one winding, the [*sic*] other strait and left between...

I can scan only by supposing that *one* was not yet pronounced *wun*, but retained its initial vowel; *th' one* clearly occupies the normal time of a single syllable[1].

There are many other points in these papers well worth considering, and they furnish a rich treasury of assorted examples. I was particularly struck by a remark (Vol. III, pp. 16–7) to the effect that 'iambic' accentuation formed no part of the original decasyllable; a remark which seems to me as true as it will be novel to many people. I hope Prof. Thomas will continue his researches into the verse of Milton and other poets; but, before doing so, I wish he would consider afresh what precisely takes place when two syllables are, as we phrase it, slurred together.

[1] Was the poetical *th' other* as real a dissyllable as the colloquial *tother*?

[The preceding pages were written before I had seen Prof. Thomas's third paper, or knew that it was to follow. They were also written in ignorance of his not being a compatriot, a fact which I should never have inferred from these essays. Having since read the third paper, I find nothing in it which alters my opinion on the matter discussed, and prefer to let these pages stand as originally written. I note, however, that 'a fixed number of syllables' now appears without qualification (p. 237, tenth line from foot; p. 245, l. 4), and that 'haste' or 'negligence' on the poet's part is again invoked as an explanation of abnormalities (pp. 237, l. 4; 238, l. 15; 255, l. 10). I think English readers will hardly recognise an *ee* sound in the words 'horrid rift abortive' (p. 248, l. 6); a better instance would have been:

O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear (p. 254, l. 6).

The bold assertion, in this paper's final sentence, that our heroic measure 'has never allowed the intrusion of trisyllabic feet,' must of course stand or fall with our definition of such feet; this is the one point dealt with in my queries. Very much in this third paper merits notice, and would receive it in any full review; admiration of its writer's care, patience, and thoroughness remains undiminished. The question of 'slurring,' however, receives no new treatment. With reference to the first footnote on p. 234, I may observe that the line quoted has no stops in Canon Beeching's edition, and may therefore be read:

Me, me, only just object of his ire,

avoiding what is certainly an unusual cadence. The second footnote on the same page surely ignores such familiar lines as (*P. L.* IV, 830):

Not to know me argues yourselves unknown,

with others less familiar, e.g. (*ibid.*, VI, 19):

War he perceived, war in procinct.

In the last example cited on p. 237, is not the word 'then' emphatic? The remarks on Milton's varied caesuras are excellent, if necessarily not novel; those on his 'harmony' (§ IX) too, except as regards contractions. Hearty thanks are certainly due to Prof. Thomas for his papers from all lovers of our great Puritan poet.]

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